

Expectations! Being ready!

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Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Among the many letters about the US elections in the SMH on Thursday there was one very brief (one line), but great letter. It simply said, "Bad news for the moose". Generally, though, the reaction was that it was very good news — for the world. It seems there is a fresh hope, and not just in the USA. But there are enormous expectations being placed on this new President-elect, and he must feel the overbearing weight of the problems he will be inheriting. It is the massive problems that give rise to the expectations. But between the problems and the expectations there is a wide gap in which can grow huge disillusionment. An extraordinary effort will be required of him to be ready for such a demanding challenge.

Moving from the human domain, we can notice that a significant shift in our reflections on the reign of God takes place today. Over recent weeks, our gospel readings have invited us to consider the nature of the kingdom, characterising it as a banquet, a vineyard, a community committed to justice. Today we begin to fasten our gaze on the goal of the kingdom, the time of fulfilment — and in this run up to Advent — the expectations of that fulfilment and being ready for it.

A wedding party was one of the greatest of all festivities in a Palestinian village. And that is why Jesus frequently used a wedding as the basis of a parable — and in every case, he was saying, in effect, that the joy of a wedding is the proper sign of the Kingdom / reign of God.

One of those parables is the gospel today! May I pose three questions and then try to suggest answers? How was the parable being told and understood by the early church at the time Matthew wrote it down? Does that differ from the way Jesus told it and the message he sought to convey? What can the parable say to us?

Matthew's understanding of the parable of the ten bridesmaids is shown by the context, and is quite clear. He saw in the parable an allegory of the return of Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. The first generation of Christians confidently expected that Christ would return — literally — and quickly — in their lifetime. But by now at least half a century had passed. The young Christian community had to adjust its thinking. We can see signs of that in the parable. But still the expectancy was there. The ten bridesmaids are the waiting Christian community, the delaying of the bridegroom is the postponement of the return, the sudden coming is the return of Christ. The parable is a summons to Christians to be ready for the second Advent. Natural! All of us who grapple with the parables today seek to re-apply them to our situation.

By his use of parables, Matthew turns Jesus' great speeches into a direct word of address to the reader. Through the vehicle of the parable, Jesus, the bearer of God's rule, conveys to the reader/hearer a vision of human existence as it is lived in God. The basic message Matthew was conveying was this: Jesus will come at the beginning of the new age, to be greeted by alert, prepared and faithful disciples — models of faithfulness — whom the reader/hearer of the gospel is to imitate so as to participate in God's future.

But was all this the original meaning of the parable? In Jesus' own preaching, it is not an allegory about the heavenly bridegroom, but a realistic story about a village wedding — perhaps he was telling a story about an actual wedding! The details seem to be very true to life.

The climax and conclusion of the wedding came when the bridegroom fetched the bride from her home, and the bridal pair entered his parents' house. The bringing in of the bridegroom, with torches, was customary. Accounts from different parts of the country give a complex picture, with details varying from village to village; but one thing common to nearly all of them is that the climax and conclusion of the wedding celebrations was the bridegroom's entry at night into his parents' house with the bride.

In the parable, the ten young women, friends of the bride, plan to go out to meet the bridegroom when he came with his friends to conduct the bride to his house for the wedding. Their role was to provide a lighted escort for the bridegroom's party. But there was a hitch! Some had neglected to provide sufficient oil for their torches. Those torches were sticks wrapped with rags soaked in olive oil, with which the young women would dance to greet the bridegroom. If necessary, more oil would be poured over the torches so they would continue burning long enough for the dance to be completed. The ten bridesmaids waited with the bride, and then they would light their torches as soon as the bridegroom came, in order to welcome him and perform their dance.

So the story that forms the basis of the parable reflects what actually happened at a Palestinian wedding; but what did the parable mean? First, a wedding was the most obvious occasion for a banquet, and clearly for Jesus, a banquet was the most typical image for full communion with God in the coming Kingdom. The parable is a call to be ready to respond to God's glorious invitation. The story is readily applicable to the situation in Jesus' ministry. It is a crisis parable. The ministry of Jesus is at the crisis point, and so people must make a decision. The details of the story emphasise the folly of unpreparedness, and the wisdom of being prepared. In the context in which the parable was being told, that meant being prepared for the developments already underway in Jesus' life. Those who are wise are those whose eyes are open to what is coming and do not live simply for the day. They take along an emergency supply of oil, thinking beyond the immediate present. When Jesus calls on disciples to keep watch, he is calling on them to take the reality of God so seriously that they can come to terms with it at any moment within their own lives.

What does it mean for us? There is no day when this parable lacks pertinence. The theme is preparedness. Preparedness is the crux of the story. What is preparedness?

Through and through it is about preparedness to discover the reality of God in life (all of) - a preparedness for a constant, daily turning to the truth, for living lives of integrity, mercy and justice, for love, joy, fulfilment. Like preparedness for a banquet! Jesus gave that clue in many parables. His call for preparedness is a call to be prepared to discover that new life, the reality of God in one's own life.

In the parable, it is that quality of life that the oil represents. It is something that only we can 'bring' for ourselves, for which only we can be responsible for ourselves. That is why the five bridesmaids who are considered to be wise are not to be censured for refusing to share their oil with those who did not have the foresight. What is required for entrance into the banquet cannot be loaned or given by another. It must be procured by oneself. It is a constant, daily turning to the truth, seeking to live lives of integrity, mercy and justice, nurturing an openness for love, joy, fulfilment. It is a constant, daily preparation for discovering the reality of God in our own lives.

In our human society, so often we prepare for the worst. Why do we not prepare for something better? Nations prepare for war, and engage in conflict, but peace and the opportunity to confirm peace find them napping. But within us there is a deep yearning for something better. Perhaps it is that yearning that has been bubbling up last week with the

election of a new, young, (history-making) African-American as the next President of the US, and placing so much expectation and hope upon him.

In today's gospel parable, the ten women represent the community of disciples, Jew and Gentile, male and female, of any social class. Their providing of light recalls the community's commission to be light for the world — to reflect the light of God in Christ that is the possibility/promise of something better. That is what we in the churches are repeatedly invited and challenged to do — to discover what it means to live in the reality of God, to live lives of integrity and justice in the context of our time and place — to be a presence for service for everyone, across all barriers of class, religion and social status.

To do so is part of what it means to be prepared. The basic preparedness is being prepared for the reality of God. That is a matter of faith. If our faith is to be alive and vital, if we are to be in a state of preparedness, we must tap the resources of God's power in prayer, worship, bible reading/study and in a faithful life — a life of integrity and justice, again and again renew our trust in God made known in Jesus. In that we discover how to prepare for the reality of God.